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full of sinew, it guides the spectator persuasively through the film and up to its moving conclusion. Like his earlier film on Castro's Cuba, *Le Joli Mai* is the lucid yet passionate essay of a man who believes in and cares about his fellow men.

The films of Marker, the Maysles, and Drew

and Leacock justify themselves by what they are. They have no need of a catchy label to bolster up their intentions. These film-makers present not *the* truth, but *their* truth. The term *cinéma-vérité*, by postulating some absolute truth, is only a monumental red herring. The sooner it is buried and forgotten, the better.

HENRY BREITROSE

On the Search for the Real Nitty-Gritty: Problems & Possibilities in *Cinéma-Vérité*

Ask a nonacademic about the *allgemeine Wahrheit* or the *Ding an sich* and he will probably look at you as if you are quite out of your head. Ask about the "real nitty-gritty" and he'll dig. He may not answer, but dig he must. He'll know that what you are asking is *what is really going on*, what is the basis, what is the truth, what is the essence of things. In the nitty-gritty world, truth and meaning turn up, more often than not, without benefit of an ideological matrix. The questions "what, why, and how" are admissible, but the answers are to be found only in the object or event itself. The trick is to be able to see them.

Cinéma-vérité, in its various manifestations, seems to be an attempt to get at the nitty-gritty of the world by observing people in the process of some crucial interactions with each other. The truth about them, the answer to "what is life really like?" is thought to be there, somewhere, and the way to tease it out is through the use of battery-powered sync camera linked to a portable sync recorder. One looks at the world through an Eclair Coutant or a modified Auricon, and listens to it through a Nagra or Perfectone recorder—and its un-

iqueness is, somehow, bound to be revealed. And sometimes it is.

Iris Barry's statement that "film is a way of seeing more than meets the eye" has been preached to an infinite number of film students, and bromidic as it may be at this time, it still suggests in a precise way that film-making is more than bearing witness. Through the manipulation of images something transcending witnessing may come about. One may argue that with editing the "truth" is distorted by the selective processes involved. The fallacy that the camera "never lies" comes easiest to those who know least about camera work. Any tyro cameraman knows which lenses to use to get the right "effect," to adjust the visible age of an actress, to pick a man out of the crowd, to get a favorable portrait. Camera angle and placement also select, emphasize, modify and distort, as do any number of other tricks of the camera profession. To argue that editing distorts the "truth" any more than camera work does would seem to be a silly argument. The reasons why *Operation Abolition* was untruthful about an event have much more to do with the intent of its producers than with the fact

that it was "edited." Conversely, without invoking intent one is hard put to find the *vérité* in *cinéma-vérité*, or, for that matter, the "Pravda" in *Kino Pravda*, its slavik god parent.

At its best, *cinéma-vérité* can get close to an object or event. It can give more than witnessing or even vicarious participation. When skillfully done, an audience member can, more than with any other style of production, get to know the subject in a way approaching, in intensity and distortion, the literary metaphor of knowing as carnal knowledge. In the best work the camera can penetrate the world of the participants, can interact with them, and can serve the functions of illuminating and revealing their world. In much *cinéma-vérité* work, however, there is the feeling of the outsider unable to gain entry into the group, who stands at the edge, disassociated, alien, but not yet alienated. He looks, he forms compositions in his mind's eye, he postulates comments on what is going on, but being outside he can't really see what is going on. Being alien, he could not understand even if he could see and hear and understand.

In the Drew Associate "Living Camera" film *Nehru*, the latter situation applies. We are told that together with Ricky Leacock and Gregory Shuker, camera and recorder team, we will intimately witness the world of Nehru. The problem is that nothing happens, or at least nothing that is understandable to the "Living Camera" team. There is no conflict, no crisis, save for the fear that Nehru will be mobbed by the throngs of Indians who turn out to hear him talk. Nehru doesn't get mobbed. Shuker almost does: the crucial event turns out to be not about Nehru at all, but rather about the film-maker. Ultimately, the relatively calm and rather dull (write this off to the "alien" explanation) witnessing of Nehru takes on a new structure. The interaction between the camera-recorder team and Nehru emerges as the focus of the film. The stress, crisis, conflict and resolution depend on whether the noninterference pact between Nehru and Leacock-Shuker will be abrogated. Will the camera and record-

er be noticed? Will Leacock and Shuker intrude? The answer is, of course, yes. The resolution is that Nehru really doesn't mind. We find out quite a bit about the "Living Camera" technique, but little about Nehru.

The differentiation between revelation and observation is really the difference between conceiving of the camera and recorder as extensions of creative personality and perceptual apparatus of the film makers and thinking about them in terms of some magical mechanical toy. Jargon like neo-pilotton, Wildum's plastic blimp, resolver, sound spot, accutron sync, and allusions to Kudelski's long-awaited something-or-other, and Arriflex's forthcoming model S are current and choice in c-v shop talk. One often wonders whether films are made by men using machines because there is no other way to state or explore that which they feel to be salient and significant or by machines alone. Does deus *ever* arrive ex machina?

Traditionally, if one can talk about tradition in this field, documentary has been concerned with revealing man and his environment, as opposed to merely recording events on film. Although the social conditions and technological means of documentary have changed enormously in the relatively recent past films are still made by men, and often are about other men.

The "Living Camera" film *Eddie* (original title: *On the Pole*) manages to tell us more about the racing car driver Eddie Sachs, his goals, ambitions, and style of life than he probably can verbalize; not that he doesn't talk, but rather that his actions are more eloquent than his verbal statements. In his relationship with his wife, with his driver colleagues, with his automobile, his pit crew, and the Indianapolis 500-mile race, Eddie emerges as a complex and often contradictory personality. The crucial action in the film is, of course, the race. Until the race, Eddie is sure that this will be his last. He will win and retire. He has come close to winning before and this time he has the coveted pole position. Tension and expectation are built up. The race

begins, concludes, and Eddie loses. After the race, his thoughts of retiring are gone. He will, of course, try again. Why does he race? He never tells us, but we know, in an intimate and complex way that defies verbalization. We know because we have been close to Eddie Sachs during a crisis in his life.

Taken as a group, the "Living Camera" films share one curious and all-pervasive trait. In a way reminiscent of traditional well-made drama, they dote on conflict and resolution. Interestingly, whereas traditionally photographed feature-film production has come to the point of eschewing fundamentally 19th-century dramatic narrative style, the technically radical "Living Camera" films make it a stock in trade for documentary. Antonioni, Godard, and even Fellini break loose from the well-made play concept, but Drew, Leacock and their collaborators use the same traditional dramatic and narrative structuring device.

The struggle for human souls seems to be a structuring device for at least three "Living Camera" films. In *David*, the struggle takes place at Synanon House in Santa Monica, California. David is a junkie trying to stay clean. Synanon is a narcotics treatment center, run by former addicts without benefit of official medical sanction or police approval. David's special problem is that his wife and child are, in the eyes of the people in charge of Synanon, interfering with his withdrawal from drugs. His responsibilities toward them are used as a rationale for possible leaving. The detrimental effects of leaving are indicated by examination of pictures of people who were made to leave by unsympathetic authorities and are now either imprisoned or dead. Soon, the struggle is for three souls. A man who left before his time returns, and we are told that he is "almost dead from massive injections of heroin." A neophyte girl arrives to kick the habit, publicly, in the living room, as is the custom. Instantly one crisis becomes three. Will David leave? Will Synanon be able to hold on to Jimmy, the returned prodigal? Will Marguerita kick "cold turkey" and stay in Synanon for complete rehabilitation? The results are two

noes and a yes. David does indeed stay, after reaching some sort of understanding with his wife. Jimmy and Marguerita leave. Visually, the most moving portions of the film are David's two good-byes to his wife: one after her first visit in the film is close to the point of intimacy, and lengthy far past audience embarrassment. It makes the point, in a subtle and complex way, that David's relationship with his wife is a strong and dependent one, and rationalizes the statement by one of the other residents in a group therapy-cum-discussion session called a "synanon," that David is an infantile person who has difficulty interacting with other persons on an adult level, and whose drug problem is intimately tied up with his problems of dependence. Perhaps the weakest point of the film, and the most obvious one, is the sequence of Marguerita "kicking cold turkey" in the living room. The narrator assures the audience that she is in need of "all of the sympathy she can get" and the camera shows us David and another resident accompanying her discomfort with a slow blues-y kind of song. It is as if the style screams to the audience "Isn't this poetic and moving!" It very well may have been, but the qualities of poesy and emotion are destroyed by its obviousness. A close second in disappointment is what is advertised by the narrator as a "violent and often explosive synanon." We are told that it works and that professionals in the field are stumped as to why; but what we see is an almost conventional discussion, reminiscent of a rather tame group therapy session. In the few instances in which reaction shots are cut in the sequence picks up in intensity, but generally one is stumped, not as to why the session works, but rather as to why the narrator advertises something that the film does not deliver. The "Living Camera" does not preclude intrusive, omniscient narration.

In *Pete and Johnny*, the struggle is by a youth worker for a teen-age kid, certifiable as a juvenile delinquent by those so inclined. The relationship of the worker with the kid, of the kid with other kids, and of the youth worker with the other kids in the area, are shown with

considerable warmth, and the wonder of this film is that the film makers could gain this kind of entré into the street world of slum teenagers. In *The Chair*, the struggle is for the life of Paul Crump, whose reformation while in prison was unrecognized by some, held irrelevant by others, and championed by the few who thought of prison as a means for rehabilitation, rather than as an instrument of social vengeance. *The Chair* is probably the most publicized of the "Living Camera" films and possibly the best. In any event, it deserves somewhat longer treatment than is possible in this article.

The "Living Camera" technique becomes doubly complex, doubly promising, and doubly disappointing in *Mooney vs. Fowle* (original title: *A Tale of Two Coaches*). The film concerns itself with an annual football game, played before thousands of spectators at night in the Orange Bowl. The competing teams are from two local high schools, and the spectators, players, students, and coaches take their football seriously indeed. The film attempts to set up a parallelism between the two schools, both in themselves and in the personalities of the two coaches. A kind of grimness and humorless determination permeates the relationships among the players and between coach and team. In a large measure, the football game becomes a microcosm of the world in which the players will soon have to participate. The object is not to play the game, but rather to win, and both coaches hammer this home to their charges in a manner calculated to make Marine basic training look like a Summerhill school. The film indulges in the pre-game pep rallies and in the half-time marching and drum-majoring with appropriate attention to immediately postpubescent sexuality. I believe it was Marshall McLuhan who described the drum major as the apotheosis of contemporary fetishism, combining organization, militarism, youth, and sex. Close-ups of behinds cut into the sequence and distorted shots using an extreme wide-angle lens let the spectator know where the living camera's mind happens to be wandering at the

time. The problem with the film is that the parallelism doesn't really work. Close-up shots of the facial tic of one of the coaches are referred to again and again in order to build tension as the game nears its close. The problem is that this is the coach of the winning team, which by the time the tic is cut in is so far ahead that victory is all but guaranteed. The most telling and horrifying shots in the film are in the dressing room of the winning team, before the game and during half time. The coach, in his pep talk to the boys, picks up a piece of wood and with it demonstrates how to deal with the opposition by beating it savagely on a bench, while shouting to his team. After the game, in the winning team's dressing room, one of the boys on the team recapitulates these instructions with a soft drink carton as he beats it ecstatically on the concrete floor.

Ultimately, critical judgement about the "Living Camera" films becomes trapped into dependence on the nature of the subject. The films, generally, are as good as their subjects are interesting. But "interesting" implies only a kind of pragmatic tautology. Subjects "work" in "Living Camera" if they have within them enough structure so that the film itself takes on a natural rather than an enforced continuity, such as that of traditional dramatic conflict. The problem is really whether the subject fits the form, which is the reverse of looking at the form-content relationship from the more traditional and perhaps more sensible point of view of fitting the treatment to the subject. The "truth" of an event, then, can be seen using the *cinéma-vérité* technique only when the event is such that its meaning is externally evident and self-structured. The juxtaposition of sequences to generate new levels of meaning, whether as practiced by Eisenstein or Basil Wright or Humphrey Jennings or George Stoney, isn't part of the rhetoric of *cinéma-vérité*. People in c-v are contrasted in real time and real space, and only if they are normally there to begin with. Relating them in filmic time and space, albeit interesting and practical in terms of films whose form is dictated by content considera-

tions, is not practicable in *cinéma-vérité*, as long as one is to be true to *cinéma-vérité's* basic assumptions of what is truth.

What seems to have happened is that important technological advances in film-making have become, for some, a magic key to the truth of the world. All of the nonsense about the film-maker, armed with camera and recorder, being able to exercise a passive "Christ-like vision" and find the real nature of the world appears to be a suitably elaborate rationale for the fact that some of the films made in this style cannot do justice to their subjects. Objectivity, in film, remains as big a myth as it ever was. An enormously promising way of treating certain kinds of subjects, i.e., those with strong internal structure, in which optimal spontaneity can reveal meaning hitherto inaccessible, is well on its way to becoming a mystique of technological existentialism, with appropriate overtones of Zen nonpreconception.

But we cannot assume as c-v seems to, that there is a universal or absolute truth about objects and events—in short, that there is a real nitty-gritty—and thus we must face up the fact that, to paraphrase Euclid on mathematics, there is no royal road to the real nitty-gritty.

YOUNG ON CINÉMA-VÉRITÉ (CONT'D)

fascinating prototype for a possible series of films which an American film-maker might do well to consider, if, and this is an important reservation, he can ever hope to get the confidence of his subjects as Herman clearly did here.

The Maysles brothers, Albert and David, are a special case. They consider themselves the purists of the movement—in *Showman* (about distributor-producer Joe Levine) and *The Beatles* they attempt to present their subjects completely without bias. As for the first, I have been told (in Hollywood) that the film is too critical of the "industry" and of Levine, and (in New York) that the film is a whitewash of the industry and Levine. I suppose, then, that the Maysles succeeded. Those who don't like *Showman* say they learn no more when it is

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over than after ten minutes—that it stays on the surface. The same would be said of *The Beatles*. The Maysles think that they should not interfere in shooting, that they should never set things up—the sequence in *Showman* with Susskind arguing at Levine in a Boston radio station just happened—for to do so would break the deal with their subject and, equally important, upset their own equilibrium as observers.

None of the film-makers discussed above would agree that he has been making superficial films. I am not even convinced this is the crucial point. An American philosopher called Mrs. Ladd Franklin once said she was surprised she rarely met another solipsist. The idealist critics should not run away when they meet an empirical film-maker. He is neither obscene nor dangerous. He is merely exploring a part of the cinema—the part Kracauer claimed (falsely) is the whole.